My mother once surprised me by saying that she regretted not taking us out of school to see President Kennedy when he had come to town decades earlier. I guess she thought he was young and there would be other opportunities. So she didn’t miss the chance some years later when President Nixon arrived to give a speech. We were so far back in the crowd I don’t remember actually seeing the president or hearing his speech, but I recall the Secret Service men on the rooftops, guns at the ready. I was old enough to sense the importance of the situation and it made a lifelong impression on me.

As we prepare for the Smithsonian traveling exhibit, The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden, and I see pictures of JFK and Nixon, they conjure scenes that are very evocative for me. What are your memories of our presidents? Did you witness a presidential candidate on the campaign trail and shake his hand? Listen to Roosevelt’s fireside chats? Watch Clinton’s impeachment trial?

Western Pennsylvania has lots of interesting ties to the presidency and we have many stories to tell. One of those began right here at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. In 1911, the Historical Society celebrated the centennial of steamboat navigation on western waters by commissioning a replica of the steamboat New Orleans. A big celebration was planned and President Taft was invited to her christening. On October 31, the president attended the christening and spoke to the crowd, then participated in a parade of steamboats by boarding the flagship Virginia. Proudly flying on the Virginia was a huge navy blue flag with the Presidential seal. It had previously flown at Cairn Casque, the Shadyside home of Robert Pitcairn, when he hosted President and Mrs. McKinley in 1897 and 1899. Mrs. Pitcairn graciously loaned the flag to the Historical Society for the centennial celebration. The flag was later donated to the Carnegie Museum and was recently transferred to the History Center.

Many collectors have focused on presidential items. One such collector in the late 19th century was John E. Burton, a businessman in Wisconsin, who greatly admired Abraham Lincoln. Burton amassed a library with hundreds of volumes on Lincoln and also collected “relics” associated with the president. The Burton collection was sold at a series of auctions in 1915-16; two of those items were then given to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Thomas Mellon II purchased an inkstand said to have been used by Lincoln while a lawyer in Springfield, Ill., and presented it to the Historical Society. The other item is a small writing desk. The desk arrived at the Historical Society around 1950 but the donor’s name is not identified. The auction catalog included the note,
"It is claimed that this desk belonged to Tad Lincoln." A curious thing about it is that "A. Lincoln" is inscribed on the inside cover in a hand very much like Abraham Lincoln's. Museum staff is investigating the signature and the donor. Whatever way it turns out, one thing is clear: Lincoln was venerated by many over the years and items thought to belong to him are treated as sacred relics.

Visit the exhibit January 31 – May 4, 2004 to see how presidents have influenced life in America and how Western Pennsylvania has affected the presidency. A memory book will be located at the end of the exhibit so you can share your thoughts about the time you shook hands with Lyndon Johnson, or saw George Bush speak, or perhaps even how you feel when you see a picture of a young Jack Kennedy. Next issue, we'll look at the exhibit in more detail.